

SWRMC Production Sailors and Civilians Participate in USFF Illuminate Thinkshop

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SAN DIEGO (NNS) -- Southwest Regional Maintenance Center (SWRMC) production department Sailors and civilians participated in an illuminate Thinkshop March 28-30 at the Admiral Kidd Catering and Conference Center in San Diego.

John Robinson, production department head, read about the illuminate Thinkshop in a February edition of the Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) Early Bird and contacted one of the team members, Lt. John Hawley, to get more information.

"The purpose of the illuminate Thinkshop is to break down barriers by bringing everyone together," said Hawley. "The course brings out what is already inside, that tacit knowledge, and lets people become comfortable with the uncomfortable. If you are comfortable with the uncomfortable, chances are you are willing to bring an idea up your chain of command - you are willing to discuss it, collaborate on it and let the good idea bubble to the surface."

The illuminate Thinkshop is a training series sponsored by U.S. Fleet Forces Command (USFF). It was co-created by Aviation Electronics Technician 1st Class Richard Walsh and Hawley based on their prior experience training and facilitating events with Sailors and the education they received at a Stanford Design School seminar at Stanford University.

Illuminate Thinkshop's informational material states they "encourage fast learning and adaptation by leveraging powerful mental tools that promote empowerment, excitement, creativity, and a collaborative environment. [Their] approach is unconventional and resonates with today's Sailors and Marines. Illuminate is not a navy mandated program - there is no instruction, no directive, and no order. It was developed, delivered, and is owned by Sailors and Marines."

SWRMC's production department has a very unique workforce due to the mixture of age and military and civilian personnel. The information Robinson heard about the illuminate Thinkshop appeared to be a good way to bring the workforce together, while appealing to the younger team members and aligning with the culture of process improvement.

Participants were selected by their product family managers to attend the three-day training to learn design thinking and human centered design. As part of the training, they were given real-life opportunity statements from Robinson and the product family managers that aligned with the department's mission and SWRMC goals. Some of the opportunity statements included reducing cost of repairs provided by the production department, increasing department morale, and improving training of the workforce. They worked in groups to develop an implementable solution to the statement in only 180 minutes and presented their solutions to leadership on the last day of the training.

"Once you get settled in your seats [with your group] and you do all this training, you find out you're actually dealing with a question that matters - that is a bit of empowerment," said Brienne Adams, a civilian in the inside machine shop. "It makes you feel like you are having a voice which is something that can get lost within a shop and between ranks."

Participants were all in civilian clothes to further encourage the free sharing of ideas.

"There is a reason we are all in civilian clothes," said Hawley. "It changes the way everyone experiences the class. Let the good ideas bubble to the surface without rank getting in the way. You shouldn't wait to for a lieutenant, lieutenant commander or a GS-14 to bring something up. If you know something is wrong, stop and fix it."

The production department participants provided positive feedback about the course to their leadership and the illuminate Thinkshop team.

"What I liked about this class was pretty much everything - you got everyone really motivated," said Gas Turbine Systems Technician - Mechanical 2nd Class Britney Askew. "You had people in civilian clothes, I like that because you don't know ranks. You don't know if someone is a petty officer, a chief or a civilian so everyone can have their own opinions without feeling like 'Oh no, it's a chief, so maybe I shouldn't say this around them.'"

Kieran Millan, a civilian in the outside machine shop, echoed Askew's thoughts, "I like that it was an offsite location because it got our minds in this open environment, we weren't just where we normally are, doing our normal thing, going through the motions, getting distracted - we had to do something different. I liked that they encouraged interactions between strangers when getting in our groups. The groups for our presentations were people we didn't know, weren't in our departments, weren't in our shops."

"What I liked most about the course is that it made you take away the box, it wasn't staying in the lines because there were no lines," said Engineman 2nd Class Whitney Smart. "They bring out your creativity that you had before but you didn't remember you had. Something else I liked about the course was how honest the [facilitators] were with us. They told us what we did well, what we did wrong and they gave us ways to fix it. They were also open to us saying, 'No I'm good, I like it the way it is.'"

In addition to hearing the participants' presentations, SWRMC and the production department leadership participated in a session to demonstrate the benefits of empowering their people.

Robinson thanked participants, noting his observations and plans moving forward.

"Thank you to all the participants - there was a tremendous amount of energy at the front of the room [during your presentations]," said Robinson. "I find it fascinating to see some of the junior petty officers and civilians in a much different role than I see in the shop. I took over ten pages of notes from the presentations - some of the stuff you guys proposed is tough. But Capt. Brunett gave us a little session before the presentation and there are some resources out there that we can reach out to solve some of these things."

SWRMC plans to work with the illuminate Thinkshop team to develop an in house training using their training model to help meet SWRMC's mission to provide superior ship maintenance, modernization, technical support and training to the Pacific Fleet.

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